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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed 337 mothers residing in New York City homeless shelters regarding their backgrounds and experiences, comparing those who were teen mothers to homeless mothers who had children later in life. Two groups of homeless families emerged: those with a foundation for advancement and those deprived of opportunities by the early burden of parenthood. Many homeless teen mothers grew up in unstable environments, with 61 percent reporting negative relationships with their parents and half stressing the absence of positive family role models. Most of these women sought companionship elsewhere and became sexually active very young. They demonstrated a profound lack of knowledge or interest regarding birth control. Homeless mothers who were not teen parents were more knowledgeable about sexual activity. Being a teen mother perpetuated the cycle of teen motherhood. Teenage families experienced significantly more episodes of homelessness than did non-teenage families. While minority groups represented half of the city's overall population, they comprised 91 percent of all homeless families in shelters, with African Americans overrepresented by two to one. Shelters can help break the cycle of pregnancy, poverty, and homelessness by coordinating efforts with policymakers to provide support to women at the greatest risk of becoming, or who already are, teen mothers. A nurturing environment can also be grounded in education. (SM)

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April 2003
A Report of the Institute for Children and Poverty/
Homes for the Homeless

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Children Having Children:
Teen Pregnancy and Homelessness in New York City

APRIL 2003

A REPORT OF THE INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN AND POVERTY

While the national teenage birth rate has declined to just 5% in the last ten years, within the homeless population it is on the rise.[1] Almost half of homeless heads of household in New York City shelters were teenage mothers. In the last year alone, the number of these women residing in the shelter system increased from 37% to 47%.[2] But why is that important? Because it is these young mothers who appear to be least equipped to deal with the everyday challenges of parenting, childcare, education, and employment, let alone finding and keeping a permanent home. In fact, 32% were homeless before age 18, and 42% have been homeless more than once (See Figure 1).

In response, the Institute for Children and Poverty surveyed 337 mothers residing in homeless shelters in New York City to better understand their backgrounds and experiences and compare those who were teen mothers to homeless mothers who had children later in life. What unfolds are two groups of homeless families—those with a foundation for advancement and those deprived of opportunities by the early burden of parenthood.

The Facts

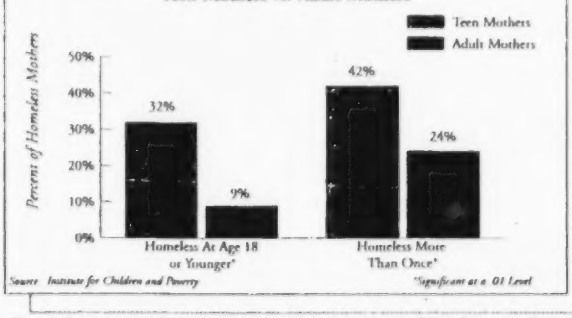
Many homeless teen mothers grew up in unstable environments: forty-one percent (41%) were removed from parental care; 39% witnessed domestic violence as a child; and one in four (25%) were actually abused as children themselves (See Figure 2).[3] In addition, 61% report negative relationships with their parents, and half stressed the absence of a positive role model within their family (See Table 1). Perhaps as a result of having little or no guidance, most of these women sought companionship elsewhere and became sexually active at a very young age. In fact, over three-quarters (80%) first had intercourse before the age of 17, and over one third (36%) by age 15. Sixty-five percent (65%) of those gave birth to their first child within one year of becoming sexually active. But why? When asked, these women demonstrated a profound lack of knowledge or lack of interest regarding birth control. Half did not believe birth control was important, 37% did not know how to obtain it, and 42% did not know how to use it. Moreover, 41% did not even know they were pregnant until their second trimester (See Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of Homeless Mothers: Teen vs. Adult*

Homeless Teen Mothers N=153		Homeless Adult Mothers N=170	
Education and Employment		**Education and Employment**	
≥ High School	34%*	≥ High School	55%
Never Been Employed	31%*	Never Been Employed	18%
Birth Control and Abortion		**Birth Control and Abortion**	
Did Not Know Where to Get	37%*	Did Not Know Where to Get	19%
Did Not Know How to Use	42%*	Did Not Know How to Use	23%
Did Not Feel it was Important	49%*	Did Not Feel it was Important	26%
Had an Abortion	50%	Had an Abortion	40%
Sexual History		**Sexual History**	
Had Sex before Age 17	80%*	Had Sex before Age 17	37%
Multiple Fathers of Children	64%*	Multiple Fathers of Children	45%
Did Not Realize Pregnancy Until Second Trimester	41%*	Did Not Realize Pregnancy Until Second Trimester	26%
Childhood History		**Childhood History**	
Mom Was a Teen Mother	53%*	Mom Was a Teen Mother	31%
Had a Role Model	53%*	Had a Role Model	69%
Had Positive Relationship with Family Members	39%*	Had Positive Relationship with Family Members	53%

*Teen Mothers are defined as those who first gave birth before the age of 19. Adult mothers are those who first gave birth at age 19 or older.
*Significant at the .05 Level
Source: Institute for Children and Poverty

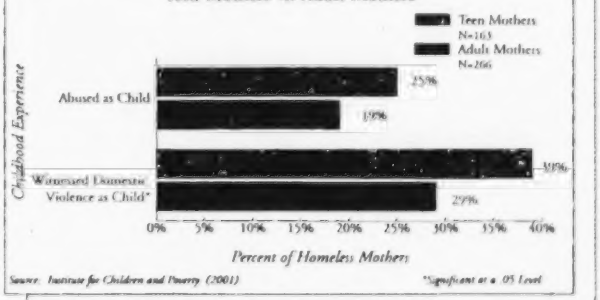
Figure 1: Age When First Homeless and Number of Times Homeless: Teen Mothers vs. Adult Mothers



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty *Significant at a .01 Level

Teen mothers are more likely to be homeless at a younger age and homeless more often when compared to homeless adult mothers. In 2002, teen mothers were 75% more likely to have reported being homeless more than once, and they were over 3 times more likely to have first become homeless before the age of 18.

Figure 2: Experience with Childhood Abuse and Domestic Violence: Teen Mothers vs. Adult Mothers



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty (2001) *Significant at a .05 Level

Homeless teen mothers experience higher rates of abuse and violence than homeless adult mothers. When compared, they were 32% more likely to have been abused as a child, and 34% more likely to have reported witnessing domestic violence in their homes.

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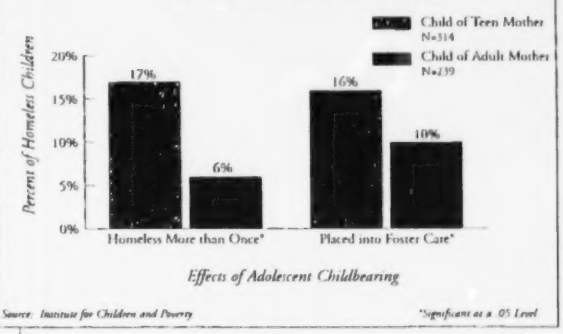
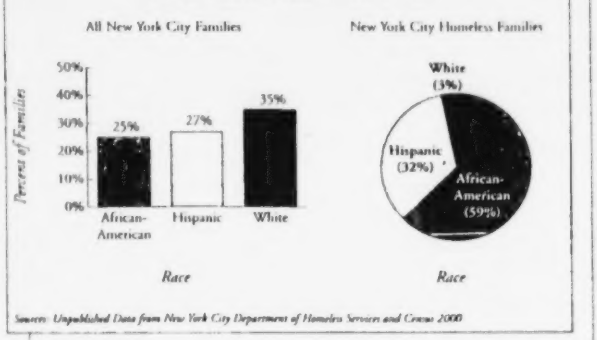
Figure 3: Effects of Adolescent Childbearing on Children: Homelessness and Foster Care



Children of teen mothers are more likely to experience chronic homelessness and foster care compared to children of adult mothers. They were nearly three times more likely to have been homeless more than once, and a significantly higher percent have already been placed into foster care.

Figure 5: Racial Profile of New York City Families: All Families and Homeless Families



The homeless population in New York City is disproportionately made up of African-American and Hispanic families. In 2000, African-Americans were over-represented in the homeless family population by 136%.

In comparison, homeless heads of household who did not have children in their teens appear more knowledgeable about sexual activity. In fact, 55% of those who had abortions did so in order to terminate their first pregnancy. Three-quarters (75%) of these older mothers knew about birth control, thought it was important, and practiced it.

The Children

Being a teenage mother also appears to perpetuate the cycle of teenage motherhood. Fifty-three percent (53%) of the teenage mothers residing in shelters were themselves the product of adolescent childbearing. This would appear to place their children at greater risk of doing the same.

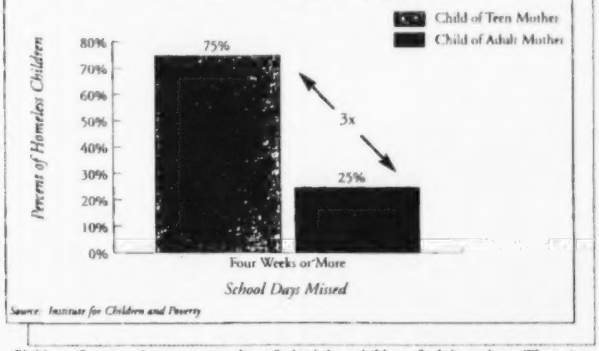
Already, homeless children born into these families seem to struggle with increased difficulties. These families are three times more likely to be homeless more than once (17% vs. 6%); the children are 60% more likely to be removed from parental care (16% vs. 10%); and virtually none of them receive any emotional or financial support from their absentee fathers (See Figure 3). In addition, these children are more prone to chronic school absences. Seventy-five percent (75%) of homeless children who miss four or more weeks of school come from families headed by former teenage mothers (See Figure 4).

In comparison, non-teenage families experience significantly fewer episodes of homelessness; only 6% have been homeless more than once, only 10% had their children removed from parental care, and only 25% of children who miss four or more weeks of school come from families headed by mothers who had their children as adults.

Race, Homelessness and Teen Pregnancy

While minorities represent 52% of the City's overall population, they comprise 91% of all homeless families in shelters, with African-Americans over-represented by two to one (See Figure 5). A closer look at these mothers reveals significant variations in birth control practices and childhood histories when controlling for ethnicity (See Table 2).

Figure 4: School Days Missed by Homeless Children: Teen Mothers vs. Adult Mothers



Children of teen mothers miss more days of school than children of adult mothers. Three times as many children of teen mothers miss one month of school or more.

Table 2: Profile of Homeless Teen Mothers by Race

	African-American N=84	Hispanic N=57
Education and Employment		**Education and Employment**
≥ High School	44%*	≥ High School 20%
Has Ever Been Employed	75%*	Has Ever Been Employed 58%
Birth Control		**Birth Control**
Knew Where to Get	69%*	Knew Where to Get 51%
Currently Uses	50%	Currently Uses 35%
Sexual History		**Sexual History**
Had Sex Before Age 17	80%	Had Sex Before Age 17 79%
Multiple Fathers of Children	73%*	Multiple Fathers of Children 46%
Childhood History		**Childhood History**
Had a Role Model	58%	Had a Role Model 46%
Had Positive Relationship with Family Members	46%*	Had Positive Relationship with Family Members 28%

*Significant at the .05 Level
Source: Institute for Children and Poverty

Hispanic teens were more likely to become pregnant younger and less likely to practice birth control when compared to African-American teens. Forty-two percent (42%) of these teen mothers became pregnant by age 15, almost twice as many as their African-American counterparts (23%) (See Figure 6). Moreover, half of Hispanic teen mothers did not have an abortion, and of those, 100% said the reason was moral and/or religious (See Figure 7). Possibly, it was these early births that limited both their education and employment opportunities. Fewer Hispanic teen mothers completed high school than African-American teen mothers (20% vs. 44%), and they were 23% less likely to have ever held a job (58% vs. 75%)(See Figure 8).

In contrast, African-American teen mothers were 73% more likely to have witnessed domestic violence in their homes as children (45% vs. 26%), and 68% more likely to have been placed in foster care (47% vs. 28%)(See Figure 8).[4] Despite this upbringing, these mothers were 35% more likely to have known where to get birth control as teenagers (69% vs. 51%), and 43% more likely to use it (50% vs. 35%). Furthermore, African-American teen mothers were twice as likely to have had an abortion before the birth of their first child (30% vs. 17%), indicating more of a willingness to use abortion as a method of postponing motherhood. Even still, while both groups of mothers have on average two children, more African-American teen mothers have had children with more than one man (73% vs. 46%).

Pregnancy Prevention Among The Homeless

The relationship between teen pregnancy and poverty in the United States is strong and well-documented. In fact, rates of teen sex are similar across all economic groups, yet birth rates for low-income teens are nearly five times that of high-income teens (40% vs. 7%) (See Figure 9).[5] This is an indication that varying degrees of sexual activity are not responsible for the prevalence of teen births among low-income families. Rather, teen births among these women are most likely related to unsuccessful pregnancy prevention.

With this in mind, how do we break the cycle of teen pregnancy and homelessness? Since shelters appear to be where these young families are ending up, part of the answer may begin there. The cycle of teen pregnancy, poverty, and chronic homelessness can be broken through a coordinated effort by policy makers and shelter providers to reach the women who were teen mothers, and the teens that are at greatest "risk" of becoming young mothers themselves.

As we have seen, many of these women grew up surrounded by violence and abuse rather than support and guidance. Having little or no direction may have contributed to their early sexual encounters, and ultimately childbearing. As a result, these young women were deprived of the opportunity to learn critical parenting and life skills, and it is here that

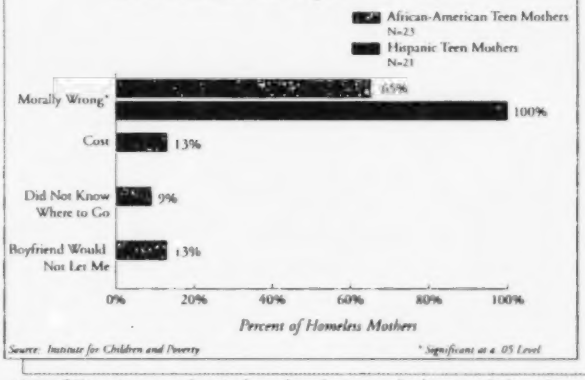
Figure 6: A Comparison of the Ages African-American and Hispanic Teen Mothers are Becoming Pregnant

African-American Homeless Teen Mothers *Hispanic Homeless Teen Mothers*

Source: Institute for Children and Poverty *Significant at a .01 Level

Hispanic teen mothers tend to have children earlier in their teens than African-American homeless teen mothers. They were nearly twice as likely to have given birth by age 15 while African-American teen mothers were 33% more likely to have been at least 16 years old.

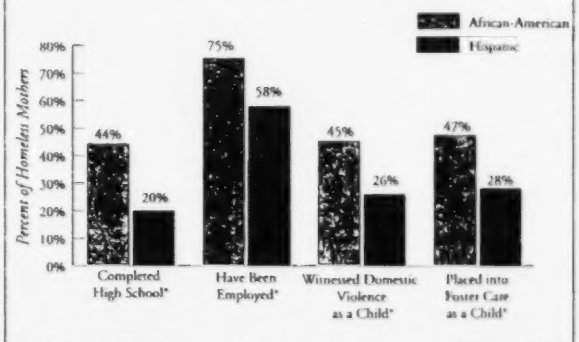
Figure 7: Reasons For Not Having an Abortion Among African-American and Hispanic Teen Mothers



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty *Significant at a .05 Level

100% of Hispanic teen mothers cited morals as the reason why they never had an abortion. African-American mothers, however, cited various reasons for not having an abortion, including the high cost, they did not know where to go, and their boyfriend would not let them.

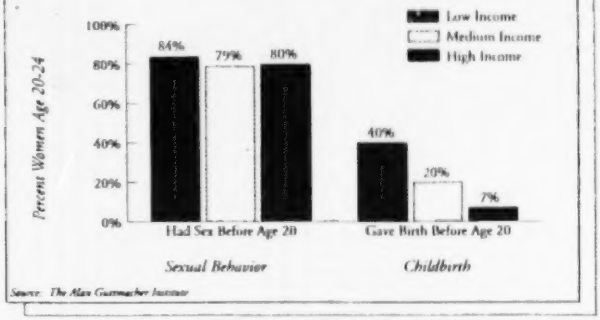
Figure 8: Differences in Childhood and Adult Experiences: African-American vs. Hispanic Teen Mothers



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty *Significant at a .01 Level

When compared to their Hispanic counterparts, African-American teen mothers were more likely to have experienced certain childhood difficulties. Nineteen percent more reported having witnessed violence in their homes and having been placed into foster care. At the same time, more than twice as many African-American teen mothers completed high school and 17% more reported having held a job.

Figure 9: Differences in Sexual Behavior and Childbirth by Income Level



Economic status clearly has a greater effect on when a woman gives birth than on when a woman first becomes sexually active. All teens have sex at similar rates, yet high income women are 83% less likely to give birth than low income women.

shelters can play a role. Perhaps by learning from shelter programs, these mothers can develop and practice the art of healthy interpersonal connections and relationships through workshops and role modeling. Their time at a shelter could be spent developing the skills that may then positively influence their own children's future decisions about sexual behavior. In this way, the shelter becomes a real turning point for both parent and child.

This nurturing environment can also be grounded in education. In demonstrating the value of an education, their children could be able to identify life alternatives, other than motherhood, before reaching their teens. By giving them the means to better position themselves, and helping them identify options, a shelter community can represent the guidance and support they may have missed. Programs can educate about birth control, reproductive health, family planning, and interpersonal skills. They should be structured in a way that allows children to explore and develop their potential and talents. Only then will these potential "mothers to be" see and believe in the slew of alternatives that exist for them.

What this environment essentially becomes is the kind of community these families never had. A "community of opportunity": a place that teaches them how to develop and maintain personal connections. If shelters continue to be looked at as temporary placements, these women and their children will continue to live without support and guidance—depriving them both of the chance to move in a new direction. Shelter providers must initiate and enhance programs that address both the educational and life-skill deficiencies that adolescent childbearing denied these women.[6] In this way, shelters turned community have the chance to prevent the downward spiral of teenage parenting from befalling another generation of children.

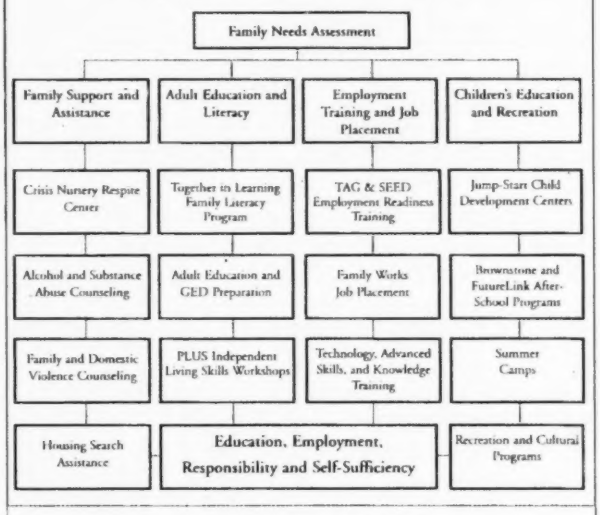
Homes for the Homeless Facilities:

Clinton Family Inn New York, NY
Prospect Family Inn Bronx, NY
Saratoga Family Inn Jamaica, NY
Springfield Family Inn Jamaica, NY
Camps Kiwago, Lanowa, and Wakonda Harriman State Park, NY
Island Shores Senior Residences Staten Island, NY

Notes:

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics Reports, Volume 50, Number 9, *Teenage Births in the United States, 1991-2000, and Update* (May, 2002).
2. All data presented is based on a 2002 survey of 337 women living in Tier II family shelters operated by Homes for the Homeless (HFH) in New York City, conducted by The Institute for Children and Poverty (ICP).
3. Numbers based on a 2001 survey of 350 homeless families in NYC that was conducted by the Institute for Children and Poverty and faculty of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.
4. Ibid.
5. The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Teenage Sexual and Reproductive Behavior in Developed Countries: Country Report for The United States, Occasional Report No. 8* (November, 2001).
6. For a complete discussion on American Family Inns and Communities of Opportunity, see Ralph Nunez, *The New Poverty: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Plenum, 1996) and *A Shelter Is Not A Home—Or Is It?* (New York: Institute for Children and Poverty, 2001).

THE AMERICAN FAMILY INN STANDARD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Crisis Nursery Respite Center
Together in Learning Family Literacy Program
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Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counseling
Adult Education and GED Preparation
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Homes for the Homeless (HFH) is a private, non-profit organization based in New York City that operates American Family Inns. Since 1986, HFH has worked to break the cycle of poverty and dependence among homeless families through education-based services.

The *Institute for Children and Poverty* is an independent research and policy think tank that works in close association with Homes for the Homeless. Through the development of effective public policy initiatives and the dissemination of quantitative research findings, the Institute examines and offers unique strategies to combat the impact of homelessness and poverty on the lives of children and their families.

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